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Walter Raleigh's School of Night and Mermaid Tavern: An Enquiry

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Introduction

Existence of The School of Night and The Mermaid Tavern has been the curiosity of most scholars dealing with sixteenth century literature. Almost every piece of study attempting to understand the lives and works of literary personae of the time has never once ceased to mention the two groups conceived by Raleigh, The School of Night and The Mermaid Tavern.

This paper is a brief enquiry into the purpose of existence of social gatherings focusing on Raleigh's School of Night and Mermaid Tavern. While clarifying their purpose this paper foremost will look into whether or not there existed any form of association between the two and for what reasons were these two so significant moreover mysterious.

Walter Raleigh was a multi faceted luminary of the Elizabethan period. Raleigh displayed skills in writing and poetry besides being a popular courtier. Elizabeth I showed keen interest in Raleigh and validated this by encouraging his projects. In recognition of his talent Raleigh was granted a Royal patent to explore the New World. This undertaking paved the path for future settlements in the New World and also won Raleigh his Knighthood. However Raleigh angered the Queen when he married one of her maids without obtaining the Queen's consent, for this Raleigh and his newlywed wife were imprisoned in the Tower to be released after a brief period. During his lifetime Raleigh was involved in multifarious activities.

The School of Night

The term School of Night appears in Arthur Acheson's 1903 work *Shakespeare and the Rival Poet* (76) and also in Dover Wilson's *Love's Labour Lost* referring to a group of learned men by this name. Walter Raleigh was the patron of The School of Night and Thomas Harriot the alchemist and mathematician acted in the capacity of its master. Originally this group which

included Walter Raleigh, Thomas Harriot, Earl of Northumberland, Earl of Derby, Sir George Carey, Christopher Marlowe, George Chapman, Mathew Royden and William Warner was referred to as "School of Atheism". However important questions that arise are how the School of Atheism came to be called the "School of Night" and whether the interests of the members attending the School of Night were confined to atheism alone.

Bradbrook states that, Robert Pearson a Jesuit priest describes the School in his English pamphlet as "Sir Walter Rawley's [*sic*] school of Atheisme by the way, and of the Conjuror that is M(aster) thereof, and of the diligence used to get young gentlemen of this school, wherein both Moyses and our Saviour, the olde and the Newe Testaments are jested at, and the schollers taught, among other things, to spell God backwards" (12). To put it differently the activities of this School were perceived as considerably seditious in nature. Bradbrook however also clarifies that "Walter's school had much wider interests than those credited to it by such scandalized outsiders. It was more serious than their reports would imply." Thus, it becomes clear that The School of Night was not as its original name "School of Atheism" depicted it to be. Rather than being narrow in its scope concentrating on atheism The School of Night's members drew their inspiration from "New Learning" which was a gathering of a wide range of scholarships that supplemented and complimented each other.

As far as Walter Raleigh and atheism are concerned, John Aubrey states that "He was scandalized with Atheisme; but he was a bold man and would venture at discourse which was unpleasant to the Church-men. I remember my Lord Scudamour sayd, 'twas basely sayd of Sir W.R. to talke of the Anagramme of Dog" (259). Aubrey further adds that his cousin Whitney alleges that "he (Raleigh) spake not one word of Christ, but of the great and incomprehensible God, with much zeale and adoration, so that he concluded that he was an a-christ, not an atheist" (259). This is an important piece of information which reveals the progressiveness harbored by Raleigh towards knowledge and advancement of research. Moreover, this opinion also makes a suggestion that Raleigh was not keen on confined thinking as was expected by the authorities and the Church.

This intellectual group included Walter Raleigh, Thomas Harriot, Henry Percy the Ninth Earl of Northumberland, Christopher Marlow, George Chapman, Matthew Roydon, Earl of Derby, and William Warner. Bradbrook suggests that these members studied theology, philosophy, geography, astronomy and chemistry. They were also believed to discuss topics that were forbidden to be discussed openly. Thus, the members of this School were at times stigmatized as atheists.

John Aubrey states that Raleigh's close friends included Edward de Vere, Earle of Oxford, Sir Francis Vere, Sir Horatio Vere, Sir Francis Drake, Nicholas Hill, Thomas Cavendish, Thomas Harriot, Sir Walter Long of Dracotin Wilts, Cavaliero Surff, Ben Jonson to name a few. This speaks

of Raleigh's high profile status among the Elizabethan literary circle. Among these Thomas Harriot was also a close associate of Raleigh in The School of Night.

Thomas Harriot, explains Bradbrook, was taken by Raleigh "into his house as mathematician tutor as early as 1580. In 1585 he went to Virginia with Raleigh's expedition and stayed a year, returning with the rest of the first settlement in Drake's fleet" (10). After his return in 1588, Harriot published *A Brief and True Report of the Newfound Land of Virginia*, in which he provides scientific details of the natural environment found there. After his return Raleigh introduced Harriot to Henry Percy who employed Harriot and allowed him a pension.

Despite Harriot being employed by Henry Percy, Bradbrook declares that "But Harriot also remained faithful to Raleigh. During the years of their imprisonment he [Harriot] transacted business for both his patrons: he helped Raleigh to collect material for his *History of the World* and there is evidence that he was with him on the night before his execution" (11). Here it is safe to assume that Harriot may also have attended the meetings at The Mermaid Tavern and subsequently was a carrier of information for his patron Raleigh who was imprisoned in the Tower from 1603 until his execution in 1618.

Henry Percy the ninth Earl of Northumberland was, in the words of Bradbrook, known as the 'Wizard Earl' owing to his interest in alchemy. Besides being a moody man he also encouraged arts and was himself a scholar (8). The Earl of Northumberland was suspected of being involved in the Gunpowder Plot and was also imprisoned in the Tower after 1606. The Earl of Derby, in the capacity of a poet belonged to the company of Lord Strange to which Shakespeare is also said to have been an affiliate. Similar to Henry Percy the Earl of Derby too was known to be a keen alchemist and at times was doubted of being involved in witchcraft. However, it is said that he had a mysterious end at a young age and not much is known about the Earl. The third noble of The School of Night was George Carey the 2nd Baron of Hunsdon due to succession from his father Lord Henry Carey. Born to Mary Boleyn, the sister of Anne Boleyn made Lord Henry Carey the first cousin of Elizabeth I and in turn had a favorable position under her reign. George Carey too enjoyed a similar fortune due to this relationship. Bradbrook mentions, Lady Elizabeth Carey, the wife of George Carey, and her daughter, also Elizabeth shared a close relationship with the poets especially Edmund Spenser and Thomas Nashe (9). Incidentally the former two also made frequent references to Raleigh and The School of Night in their works.

Another member, Christopher Marlowe settled in London around the year 1587 as a poet and dramatist. T. S. Eliot describes him, "not excepting Shakespeare or Chapman the most thoughtful and philosophic mind, though immature among the Elizabethan dramatists" (133). Marlowe's writings reveal that he was a freethinker who considered knowledge to be the goal of humanity. He is known by his works such as *Tamburlaine the Great* and *Doctor Faustus* among others.

Marlowe was shrouded with apocryphal legends which also took his life at the young age of twenty nine.

To the School of Night, it was Matthew Royden who introduced the poet and dramatist, George Chapman who is best remembered for his translations of Homer's Greek epic poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the Homeric parody *Batrachomyomachia*. Mathew Royden according to Bradbrook was "the most interesting of the lesser men." (11). According to Louis Ule George Chapman's *Shadow of Night* addresses the existence of a group probably the School of Night which also included noblemen interested in learning. Although no specific mention of Raleigh's circle is made Chapman clearly expresses that "... that most ingenious Derby, deep-searching Northumberland, and skill embracing heir of Hunsdon [Sir George Carey] had most profitably entertained learning." Ule stresses however that Chapman did mention two noblemen, namely Lord Strange, the Earl of Derby and the Earl of Northumberland were the two individuals who Marlowe in 1592 was said to have been well acquainted with. (Ule 210) It can be thus inferred that Chapman, Marlowe and Royden were connected through the School of Night.

According to Yates, a large portion of the satire of Shakespeare's comedy *Love's Labour's Lost* interestingly mocks at Raleigh, Chapman and their gathering, a few lines of which are as below:

These earthly godfathers of heavens lights,
That give a name to every fixed star,
Have no more profit of their shining knights,
Than those that walk and wot not what they are.

Yates suggests that their obsessed absorption in the field of new astronomy at the School of Night influenced Shakespeare to write satire such as the aforementioned verse (91).

By the last decade of the sixteenth century Raleigh's group involved in discussions on atheism had become an issue raised by Thomas Kyd, Richard Baines and the Devonshire clergy whose testimony tried to validate the charges of atheism on account of having "brought the Godhead in question and the whole course of the Scriptures..." (Bradbrook, 13-14). However the testimony could not prove that the school propagated atheism publicly due to which the charges were nullified. Further with the ascension of James I to the throne in 1603 Raleigh ceased to enjoy the favorable position he had during the time of Elizabeth I. Raleigh was arrested on charges of involvement in the Main Plot against James I, sentenced to imprisonment in the Tower and executed in the autumn of 1618.

The Mermaid Tavern

Another salon of intellectuals under the leadership of Raleigh was The Mermaid Tavern or sometimes referred to as The Mermaid Club or The Friday Club. An account of Thomas Coryat's travel to 'the Court of the Great Mogul' in India is visible through the compendium of letters and narratives published in 1616, a year after they were written bear the title;

Thomas Coryate,

Travailer

For the English wits, and the good of this Kingdom:

To all his inferior Countreyemen, Greeting: Especially to the Sireniacall Gentlemen, that meet the first Friday of everie Moneth, at the Mermaide in Breadstreet. From the Court of the great Mogul, resident at the Towne of Asmere, in the Eastern India.

'The Mermaide in Breadstreet' above refers to The Mermaid Tavern located on Cheapside, London and said to have had entrances on both Bread Street as well as Friday Street. As is also mentioned in the title, it was customary that on the first Friday of every month a meeting of Gentlemen was convened. These gatherings of Gentlemen at the tavern were essentially members of a literary group called 'the Friday Street Club' and is said to have been pioneered by Walter Raleigh. Particularly, William Gifford's 1873 work mentions "Sir Walter Raleigh, previously to his unfortunate engagement with the wretched Cobham and others, had instituted a meeting of *beaux esprits* at The Mermaid, a celebrated tavern in Friday Street" (19). Besides validating Raleigh's initiative it also suggests that Raleigh was not just the founder but also a participant.

However, I. A. Shapiro in his article *The Mermaid Club* declares "It is astonishing that this should ever have gained acceptance. Raleigh's 'pride' was his most noted characteristic, but had he been otherwise it would still be difficult to conceive anything less likely than Elizabeth's captain of the guard organizing or presiding over tavern meetings of this kind, and even the Romantics must have known that Raleigh was imprisoned in the Tower from 1603 until after..." (6). Raleigh as we have already seen was also involved with the establishment of another similar literary society, The School of Night, thus rendering this claim of Raleigh's pride rather debatable.

The Tavern's existence was shrouded in mystery until Coryat's letter from India is said to have revealed its existence. Strachan admits "He attended meetings at The Mermaid Tavern Club – indeed he provides the only indisputable contemporary evidence of its existence" (1). Strachan further asserts that "The plain but surprising fact is that Coryat's letter from India to the High Seneschall of The Mermaid Club provides the only definite proof that such a club existed" (146).

Thus, mention of the tavern in Coryat's letters is vital in validating its existence.

The meetings at the Tavern were attended by well known playwrights, authors and poets. According to Gifford, Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, John Selden, Robert Bruce Cotton, Richard Carew, Richard Martin, John Donne and many others attended the meetings (19). As can be noted these members were some of the elites of urban London at the time. However, I.A Shapiro refutes Gifford's claim that the above mentioned members were present at the gathering, by suggesting that Gifford may have relied only on merely two sources of evidence: one being Coryat's letter and the other being Francis Beaumont's verse letters to Ben Jonson.

In this regard, Michelle O'Callaghan in *The English Wits*, raises the point that "This, does not mean, however, that forms of clubbing did not take place at taverns in early modern London... Dining and drinking were accompanied by rituals of fellowship, extempore versifying and orations, and game playing" (2). She further clarifies that although these activities were not regularly recorded for the future generation, they made regular appearances in pamphlets, poems or plays of the time. To mention a few, Thomas Middleton's *Your Five Gallants* and John Keats's *Lines on the Mermaid Tavern* highlight the gathering and activities at the Tavern. Thomas Middleton's play performed around 1607, according to O'Callaghan, "is peppered with allusions to the Mitre and the Mermaid taverns as fashionable places to be seen among the company in London" (Ibid.) reveals that it was a status symbol among the literary circle to gather at such taverns in the heart of London.

Although the account that William Shakespeare attended these meetings is debatable, Roy C. Flannagan in his *John Milton: A Short Introduction* reveals that Milton's house "...was not far from the Boar's Head Tavern and the Mermaid Tavern...and a few blocks from the Blackfriars Theatre, a Shakespearean enterprise in which John Milton Sr. was a shareholder. Milton mentions both Jonson and Shakespeare – frequenters of the Boar's Head and The Mermaid – with some knowledge and some affection in his early poetry (1). This is suggestive in negating the doubt concerning Shakespeare's appearance at The Mermaid Tavern. Another account given by Alan and Veronica Palmer in *Who's Who in Shakespeare's England* supposes that "Shakespeare has been a subject of much legend, near contemporaries relating anecdotes of genial rivalry, for tales of drinking parties at The Mermaid and just before Shakespeare's death tended to include the presence of Jonson as a matter of course" (136). This further strengthens the premise that Shakespeare did make visits to The Tavern and moreover had interactions with Ben Jonson there.

Furthermore The Mermaid Tavern belonged to one William Johnson, who according to Leslie Hotson in *Shakespeare's and Mine Host of the Mermaid* was an acquaintance of Shakespeare. Hotson also reveals that The Blackfriars agreement deed with Shakespeare's signature has been

attested and seconded by none other than William Johnson, thus making him the guarantor of the deal. This goes on to prove that Shakespeare's proximity to The Tavern's landlord went to the extent that Shakespeare was able to convince him to sign and second the deed. With the aforesaid records in mind, it is assumed that Shakespeare too had personal reasons to visit The Mermaid Tavern.

Another important point worth noting here is the participation of Thomas Coryat in the Tavern meetings. O'Callaghan in her essay *Tavern Societies, the Inns of Court, and the Culture of Conviviality in Early Seventeenth-Century London* states that "I.A Shapiro concluded from his study of the composition of the Mitre and The Mermaid Tavern societies that it did not gather for the purposes of appreciation of *belles lettres*, since it did not include a professional writer like Ben Jonson, but was dominated by lawyers, merchants, and former members of Prince Henry's household" (Adam Smyth, 42). This could also suggest that Coryat brief listing as a member of Henry's household could have been instrumental in introducing Coryat to the meetings at The Mermaid.

Conclusion

Coryat's letter from India provides us with concrete proof that a group of intellectuals met at The Mermaid Tavern. Indeed both the gatherings, The Mermaid Tavern and The School of Night by default have a connection simply on the basis of them having Raleigh's leadership. However from a look into the variety of people associated with them, it can be understood that these gatherings had a purpose of advancement of study and were progressive. This is visible from the visit (between 1583-86) of the Italian thinker Giordano Bruno a proponent of the Copernican theory, subsequent to which the discussions that followed made a significant contribution, and the replacement of the Aristotle theory by the Copernican thought which was a major breakthrough in the field of scientific research. Since some of the subjects they discussed were highly sensitive in nature, the members chose to deliberately maintain secrecy. However secrecy also meant sedition. Although witchcraft and occultism had a negative image to the extent that they were considered as good as treason, these subjects were not rejected from the periphery of scholarship and thus chosen to be addressed. However any such acknowledgement or mention of atheism in the form of skeptic thinking challenged the foundations of the Church, a direct threat to the authority. With The School of Night coming under the scanner of the Church authorities, their activities gradually ceased to be mentioned. Further looking at the time period that the activities of the respective gatherings took place, there seems to be a before-after phenomenon at play. Although this paper did not specifically scrutinize the time periods and sequence of the

gatherings, it is thought that it could be perhaps that The School of Night faded out eventually giving birth to The Mermaid Tavern. Although this is not proven in this paper it does open a new discussion in the same light.

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